

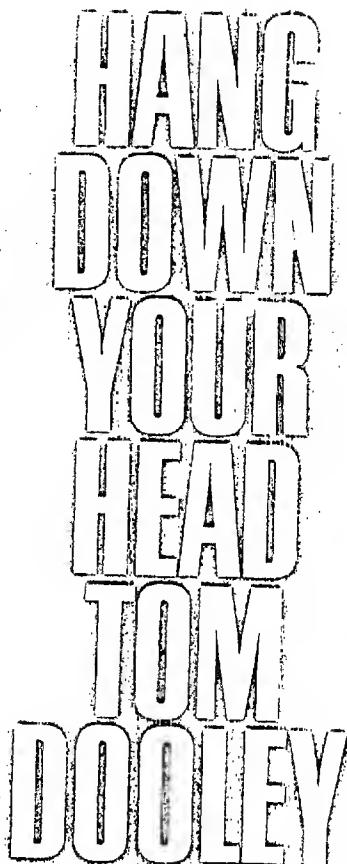
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25 YEAR RE-REVIEW

I SUSPECT THAT MANY American Catholics were secretly relieved last October at the demise of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu. The reports of their "Catholic Despotism" had threatened to get out of hand. It is one thing to spread the faith and have the Church prosper, and quite another to cause Buddhist monks to burn themselves and little school children to riot. American Catholics have come to understand well that a minority survives only through tolerance, and in a nation where Catholic politicians make it a point to show up at Bar Mitzvahs, it would be unnatural if they did not come to despise Diem for the sheer incompetence of his politics. Diem, it might have been reasoned, should not have had the Buddhists shot for carrying the flag of their Church, but rather he should have carried one himself and in the front line of every major procession.

But all this is excessively cynical. There is, of course, the moral dimension. Ngo Dinh Diem was after all the man who provided a sanctuary for millions of refugees, who worked with young Dr. Tom Dooley to give these people medical aid, and who helped them to new independence and dignity with the aid of Catholic Relief Agency funds. Was it not all this that the student body of Fordham University had in mind when it gave a standing ovation for the embattled Mme. Nhu? It is a tortured connection that these students must have had with Vietnam, for they very likely had been raised to hope that in that country at least the missionary program of the Church had an idealism that was modern and clean. And then one day they find that it too could be used to taunt them. It was good, then, to read Clare Boothe Luce in the *National Review* and find out that the bad things had never happened, or that, when they did, they were necessary and therefore not really bad.

This complex sense of guilt and achievement as regards Vietnam is nowhere better illustrated than in the



Jesuit weekly *America*. Casual readers of that publication may have thought it odd that its cover this past October 3, was a stark black background for the white heading "Marguerite Higgins on Vietnam." Miss Higgins, who had gone to bat for Diem in the last months of his regime, was now back to tell us about how bad things were in Saigon with her man, Diem, long gone.

This article was featured so prominently in *America* because over the years that magazine had bought deeply of the Ngo Dinh Diem myth and now, after the fall, it was out to recoup some of its losses.

Before his demise, *America* had referred to Diem as "the courageous little President of South Vietnam" and had answered his critics with the following: "If the government is

in some respects authoritarian, it is because the task it had in hand demanded authority. . . . It is significant that the opposition within Vietnam to Ngo Dinh Diem does not come from the grassroots. The peasantry has given the President its full support. The discontented are usually disappointed, would-be politicians."

This was written just before the fighting in the countryside began and it is now clear that Diem's estrangement from the peasantry is the key element in the continued success of the Viet Cong campaign. But how did *America* come to work itself into a position of such total wrongheadedness? The answer is that it

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